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SUBJECT: KERRY - ASAD: SAUDIS MAY BE SOWING THE SEEDS OF
LEBANON'S NEXT CIVIL WAR

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C/NF) Summary: Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator John Kerry asked President Bashar al-Asad February 21 about Syria's activities in Lebanon in the lead-up to Lebanese elections in June. Asad, clearly primed, demanded, "Saudi Arabia has spent millions of dollars in Lebanon for the elections . . . are you against this (too)?" Asad refused to yield to pressure to quickly name a Syrian ambassador to Beirut, calling it a "sovereign issue," and implying that the French had railroaded him unwittingly into making a commitment to send an ambassador before the end of ¶2008. "Every step has a meaning," he said, declaring that he knew whom he would appoint and when he would announce the appointment, refusing to share the information before then. Asad alleged the Saudis were "paying out money, approaching the elections like a political war." If the line that ultimately separates Lebanon's political opponents is sectarian, then, Asad warned, the seeds of the next civil war will have been sown. Asad's overt anxiety over trends in Lebanon, and his particular concern over Saudi interference, demonstrates yet again that Syria views Lebanon as its vulnerable underbelly and is still preoccupied by the perpetual concern that civil war could once again erupt there. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Senator John Kerry emphasized a new U.S. approach to diplomacy in the Middle East during a February 21 meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad that lasted more than two hours. Also attending the meeting were Syrian FM Walid al-Muallim, Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Bouthaina Shaaban, and Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustafa. Kerry was accompanied by Charge as well as SFRC staffers Frank Lowenstein and Perry Cammack. This cable reports on the discussion of Syria's relationship with and activities in Lebanon. Other topics septels.

Intervention in Lebanon: Accusations against Saudis

¶3. (C/NF) Senator Kerry broached the subject of Lebanon with Asad by positing that Asad might be willing to agree to send a Syrian ambassador to Lebanon and stay out of Lebanon's electoral process as signs of Syrian respect for Lebanese sovereignty. Asad, nearly bristling, asked what Kerry meant by "staying out" of Lebanese elections, asking, "how am I in?" Acknowledging Syria's long-time historical and cultural interests in Lebanon, Kerry said the question is whether or

not there is any direct interference in Lebanon's elections. Asad, clearly primed, declared, "Saudi Arabia has spent millions of dollars in Lebanon for the elections . . . are you against this (too)?" "Syria isn't rich, we don't have money . . . and Iran can send money to Lebanon without Syria being involved . . . Iran has its own embassy there." Shifting tactics, Kerry asked if Asad could have his ambassador in Lebanon by mid-March, for example. Asad again balked and asked why is the ambassador so important; "Did I open an embassy in Beirut without the intention of sending an Ambassador?" Kerry responded that sending an ambassador is a metric useful in calculating changes in policy. Asad answered that he had been ready to send an ambassador in 2005 but the "previous Lebanese government had not been good (sic) with Syria." He continued, "Now, after the Doha agreement (that resolved the impasse over the election of a new Lebanese president), the new President is good and we are ready to exchange ambassadors." Asad acknowledged his relations with Lebanese President Michel Sleiman were moving forward, but not fast.

French Railroading on Ambassadorial Appointment

¶4. (C/NF) Harking back to July, Asad confided that during his visit to Paris for the Bastille Day celebrations, French President Nicholas Sarkozy had wanted to hold a press conference to welcome the Syrian decision to establish diplomatic relations but Asad had declined. Later, when French FM Bernard Kouchner visited Syria in August, he asked when a Syrian ambassador would be sent to Beirut and he was

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told before the end of the year. (Comment: Asad seemed to imply that this conversation was the source of the expectation that Syria's ambassador would take up residence by the end of 2008. End comment) And, then, at a later date, Asad said, French Presidency advisor Claude Gueant came to Damascus and asked the question again. "This is a sovereign issue," Asad declared to Kerry. "I know the name (of the ambassador-designate) and the date (the name will be announced) . . . the timing has meaning . . . every step has meaning . . . but it's our timing and it's not important to the Syrian) U.S. relationship."

Fears of the Next Civil War

¶5. (C/NF) Returning to the Lebanese elections, Asad repeated his accusations against Saudi Arabia, alleging the Saudis were "paying out money, approaching the elections like a political war." If the line that ultimately separates Lebanon's political opponents is sectarian, then, Asad warned, the seeds of the next civil war will have been sown. "It's important that the Saudi money doesn't only go to the Sunni bloc," he said, "or else there will also be a Shia bloc and the Christians will have no choice but to form their own bloc." Shaking his head, he said, "This is always the problem in Lebanon." Kerry noted that religious polarization is a concern for all secular governments to which Asad replied that his "prime challenge" is dealing with extremism and terrorism. Kerry noted that Asad's vision for the future was different from that of an organization like Hizballah. Asad said that Hizballah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah believes in an Islamic state but that remains only a concept unless Hizballah were to receive an overwhelming majority of 70-80 percent of the vote. "In the West," Asad said, "you think about Hizballah as missiles and terrorists but most Hizballah members have other occupations to pursue and would welcome peace." Kerry asked how Asad derived his confidence that Nasrallah would give up religiously-based appeal for political power? Asad answered that Hizballah now "has an excuse because of Israel." If there were peace, he said, people would not be ready to die, there would be no

grass roots support for these groups (like Hizballah) when there is peace. But, Asad also said, Nasrallah can be trusted: "When he says something, he does it."

Border Issues

16. (C/NF) Kerry asked about progress on the process of demarcating the border between Syria and Lebanon. Asad replied that there is "no historical problem" between Syria and Lebanon on the border but there are a number of villages that are Lebanese but whose access roads are in Syria; some children even attend Syrian schools. The demarcation process, he said, was started three years ago. Syria had wanted to start in the north while Lebanon wanted to start in the south because of the GOL's problem with Hizballah. Kerry asked if the demarcation process with Lebanon was pending completion of the demarcation process for the Syrian-Jordanian border. Asad responded, "It's done" but Muallim intervened to say that the demarcation committee still needs two months to finish the Jordanian border. In response to Kerry's question regarding the PFLP-GC camps along the Syrian - Lebanese border, Asad explained that the camps straddle the border. He had told Sleiman that when the Lebanese have consensus among themselves regarding the Palestinian militias and Al-Qaeda, Syria would assist in closing the camps. "But we can't do it without consensus -- it would start a civil war."

17. (C/NF) Comment: Asad's hackles were obviously raised by prodding over when he would send his ambassador to Lebanon. Granted, he is often asked the question (and was asked three times in one week by U.S. codels); he now seems inclined to dismiss the end of 2008 deadline as the French having railroaded him unwittingly into a commitment. Strangely, Asad did not react with counter-complaints that the Lebanese have been slow to open an embassy in Damascus, even if their ambassador has been named. What appears to genuinely concern Asad is the idea that Saudi manipulation of the elections

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will exacerbate tensions in Lebanon to the extent that cross-confessional alliances would break down entirely. He kept mum, of course, on Syrian efforts to influence the elections but curiously handed up the Iranians. Asad is perhaps less comfortable with the notion of a predominant Hizballah than his testimonial to Hasan Nasrallah would suggest. Asad's overt anxiety over trends in Lebanon, and his particular concern over Saudi interference, demonstrates yet again that Syria views Lebanon as its vulnerable underbelly and is still preoccupied by the perpetual concern that civil war could once again erupt there.

18. (U) Codel Kerry has cleared this cable.
CONNELLY